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One thousand four hundred years ago, at the time of the prophet Muhammed, Muslim women participated in wars, worked as nurses and doctors, owned and operated businesses and were actively involved in public religious life. I am fighting to get our quranic rights back and to make Muslim women visible in public again!

1 These are words of the Muslim women's rights activist Naish Hasan, co-founder of the Indian Muslim Women's Movement (*Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan* or BMMA), established in 2007, in an interview conducted at her home near Lucknow University in winter 2010. Hasan's claim to work toward stretching the boundaries of the politically contested public legal space via struggles over competing definitions of religious *knowledge* and *authority*[1] reflects a central plank in the agenda of Muslim women's activism in the city of Lucknow. For example, Shaista Amber, president of the Lucknow-based All India Muslim Women's Personal Law Board (AIMWPLB) established in 2005, insists that the Muslim leaderships' misogynist interpretations of the *Quran* and the *Hadith* prevent women from participating in pubic religious life. In a similar vein, Shehnaz Sidrat, president of Lucknow's oldest Muslim women's organisation founded under colonial rule in 1934, *Bazme Khawateen* (women's club), takes issue with patriarchal interpretations depicting women's active participation in the public space as an onslaught on their modesty and, hence, as a religious 'sin.' Recent *fatwas* released by the eminent Lucknow-based Sunni seminaries *Darul Uloom Nadwatul Ulama* reflect the patriarchal leaning in the *ulema's* (community of eminent religious authorities) interpretations of the religious texts. These *fatwas* (legal opinions) strongly advise women against becoming a *qazi* (judge), a *mufti* (law expert), or an *alima* (scholar), and discourage them from praying in public mosques. By making their bodies seen and their voices heard within Lucknow's contested public space, these middle-class Muslim women blatantly disrupt generally accepted assumptions of women's respectability, egalitarianism, freedom, and equality.

2 To open up questions on 'who' has the authority to interpret the Islamic scripts and of 'what' is the 'true Islam' currently dominates the agenda of Muslim women's activists not only in the city of Lucknow—but also in the Muslim world more generally. Against the backdrop of the proliferation of hard-liner patriarchal groups, the spread of fundamentalist thought and practices, and the growth or reappearance of political Islam, Muslim women's rights activism worldwide is geared toward the re-reading of the Islamic texts and history so as to deconstruct ideas of womanhood in Islam (Al-Ali 2012). By deconstructing gendered Islamic discourse, these Muslim women's rights activists, often termed as 'Islamic feminists' (Badran 2008; Mirza 2008), produce alternative proposals of Islamic justice that challenge the authority and power of conservative religious circles and/or the state.[2] The aim of many Muslim women's rights organisations and networks in India is similar: to challenge the masculine bent of current interpretations of the religious texts and history (Kirmani 2009; Vatuk 2008). In India, Muslim women-led networks and organisations started emerging in the late 1980s and early 1990s in urban centres (Kirmani 2011: 74). At that time, religious and political conservatism was growing. In this context, the orthodox All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) reduced the category of Muslim woman to a symbol of a religious tradition that needs to be 'protected' from the onslaught of Hindu nationalism (Sunder Rajan 2003). This political process of homogenising and solidifying Islamic discourse and tradition adversely affected Muslim women's position under state law. The lack of advocates and supporters in the secular Indian women's movement for the cause of improving the lot of Muslim women sparked

some middle- and upper class Muslim women to split from the women's movement in the late 1990s and find their own women's organisations (*e.g.* Muslim Women's Forum in Delhi, the Mumbai-based Women's Research and Action Group, the Muslim Women's Rights Network, Awaaz-e-Niswan, AIMWPLB, and the BMMA) (Kirmani 2009; Hasan 1998).[3] Although still few in numbers, this 'nascent Islamic feminists movement,' in the words of Sylvia Vatuk (2008), or 'minority feminism,' as Nida Kirmani (2011a, 2011b, 2009) terms it, has in the last decade gained considerable visibility within the public space.[4] In fact, women's activism and organising around the Gudiya 2004 and Imrana 2005 cases contributed to the growth in Indian Muslim women's activism since the 1980s.[5]

3 Within the last decade, the city of Lucknow has—like no other city in India—experienced a proliferation of Muslim women's organisations which aim at publicly overturning chauvinistic ideals of women's subjectivity in Islam within a contested socio-political landscape. Such a landscape includes the patriarchal state, the conservative male-dominated AIMPLB that claims to represent the entire Muslim community at the national level, and the equally male-dominated more recently formed (in 2005) All India Shia Personal Law Board. The current rise of political Islam in the city of Lucknow, nourished by ideological tensions between Sunni and Shia groups (Freitag 1989: 249), galvanised both Sunni and Shia women to openly destabilise relations of power and question established ideas of gender equality in Islam. However, whereas Shia women tend to debate issues of Islamic law and practice within the intimate comfort zone of their traditional spiritual meetings called *majlis*, which usually take place on religious sites such as mosque courtyards, Sunni women have more recently carried their struggle for justice into the politically and ideologically contested public sphere. The presidents and founding members of the AIMWPLB, the BMMA, and *Bazme Khawateen*, which are at the centre of this study, are amongst the most vocal Muslim women's activists in the city. Interestingly, despite being co-players in a project of decentering the AIMPLB, they see themselves as competitors, rather than auxiliaries in their struggle for justice within an Islamic framework. These activists prefer different Islamic clothing styles, live in different neighborhoods, use different ideological and political strategies to vie for the support of Muslim women (and men) within a highly competitive political and discursive field, and, not surprisingly, cultivate unique relationships with the state and with Muslim leadership. In short, Muslim women's activists' positioning is neither uniform nor simple, but fragmented along lines of politics and religious ideology.

4 Drawing from the findings of 10 months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out in the city of Lucknow,[6] this paper looks closely and comparatively at the manner in which the presidents and founding members of the AIMWPLB, the BMMA, and *Bazme Khawateen*, create space for their activism within contested local and national contexts. I argue that these public contestations over the meaning of womanhood, freedom, egalitarianism, and equity evince the fluidity of the categories of Islam and women's rights on the ground—revealing Islam as a 'discursive tradition' (Asad 2009 [1986]) rather than as a fixed system of belief and practice. Whereas scholarship on Islam, gender and law in India tends to discuss Muslim women's rights struggles in relationship to the state and through the lens of Muslim women as the oppressed subject (Patak and Sunder Rajan 1989; Hasan 1998, 1999; Agnes 1999; Sunder Rajan 2003; Chhachhi 2005), this micro-level study explores the multiple strategies of public self-representation used by these Muslim women's activists to contest widely-accepted notions of Muslim women as relegated to the private sphere and with no political agency. Such analysis illustrates the multiple positions of Muslim women's rights activism—an aspect often neglected in liberal and modernist scholarship on Islamic gender justice struggles.

1. Muslim Women's Activism in Lucknow – Manufacturing Respectability within the Public Space

5 The visible Sunni woman who accesses the public space purposely—she organises political rallies, teaches about Islam in parks and mosques, and engages in policy making—stretches the gendered boundaries of what is considered to be a 'good' (*shareeef*) or 'bad' (*haram)* woman in ultra-conservative discourse—as for example promoted by the AIMPLB. Within

such discourse, notions of the 'good' or 'bad' woman converge with the idea of the 'private' and 'public' sphere. All too often, scholarship on Islam and gender theorises Muslim women's entrance into the public sphere as radical and new and as breaking with core ideas of Islamic ideology (Papaneck 1982; Forbes 1982; Minault 1982). However, as I will show below, to frame Muslim women's subjectivity within the binary of the public and private sphere neglects the intermediary spaces within which these Muslim women's activists currently negotiate political agency as Islamic subjects. Phadke, Ranade, and Khan (2009) make an important observation in this regard. Drawing on an intersectional analysis of gender and space in the city of Mumbai, the authors point out that women who self-assertively enter the public space tend to represent themselves as 'bearers of all moral and cultural values that define the family/community/nation' (2009: 187). However, instead of analysing such public self-representations as a form of backwardness—as modernists tend to do—they analyse the transfer of such moral discourse, or discourse of respectability, into the public space as an opportunity for women's participation within Mumbai's strongly male-dominated public space.

6 Similarly, more recent works on Islamic feminism view Muslim women's goal to achieve respectability in public as a means to create space for political activism, and consequently agency. For instance, the political scientist Nilüfer Göle (1996) analyses the Islamist veiling movement of university students in Turkey during the post-1983 period as an incident where a specific Muslim identity is constructed within the public space. In this context, she convincingly argues, the veil emerges as a strategy for enlarging women's space for political activism in the context of modernisation and liberal aspirations of nation-building in Turkey. Similarly, Saba Mahmood in her ethnography *Politics of Piety* (2005) offers a compelling exposition of the possibilities such embodiments of religious practices hold for political agency. Mahmood's work draws on the example of a grassroots women's piety movement in the mosques of Cairo to show that women's embodied religious practices are not simply a reflection of their personal beliefs, but the very means through which subjectivities are cultivated and agency acquired. Mahmood argues that this form of pious subjectivity, although seemingly incommensurate with assumptions of the liberal subject undergirding feminist scholarship, does not stifle women's agency. In fact, it constitutes an altogether different form thereof. Such a conceptual framework, as developed by critical feminist scholarship, is helpful in understanding Lucknow's Muslim women's activists' claim to assert agency through the embodiment of respectability—a claim which is often couched in a symbolic language of piety.

7 Let me illustrate. Shehnaz Sidrat (*Bazme Khawateen)* is a former interior designer who later took over *Bazme Khawateeen,* or the women's club, founded by her mother-in-law in colonial India. In the position of the club's president she designed her own 'modern Islamic dress,' as she calls it. This dress consists of a knee-length and loose beige coat, loose trousers (*salwaar),* and a colourful or black scarf tightly wrapped around her face. When in public, Sidrat often complements this outfit with a pair of big sunglasses. For Sidrat this kind of dress conforms to the Islamic tenets of 'modesty' and 'simplicity'—attributes that she considers key for women to maintain respectability within the public space. This is to say that Muslim women manufacture their religious and gender identity in public within the complexly layered gendered hierarchies that leave unquestioned the concept of sexual difference as established and re-produced through the idea of the 'private' and the 'public.' The dress that covers her entire body allows Sidrat to forge a specific ideal of the good Muslim woman and pay respect to the clergy affiliated with Lucknow-based Islamic Sunni seminary *Firangi Mahal*—an institution to which her family is linked through ties of kinship.

8 Similarly, Shaista Amber, the president of the AIMWPLB, substantially changed her way of dressing when she became president of the AIMWPLB in 2005. As a wife of an army officer, and dressed in expensive *sarees* and wearing the family jewellery, she was in the line of fire of the criticism by the clergy affiliated with the *Darul Uloom Ndawatul*. 'In an editorial of some Urdu newspaper published by the Deobandi,' Amber recalls, 'it was said that my work and lifestyle were non-Islamic and that I spoke of non-Islamic things. The Deobandi called me a *deharia,* which designates a person who doesn't believe in any religion.'[7] In an

attempt to counter such accusations, Amber donned the headscarf and the simple ankle-length coat. For Amber, the bodily transformation from the upper-class and spoiled officer-wife to the 'respectable Muslim women's activist' secured her the respect and trust from the Sunni community, and allowed her to engage in politics without being labelled as a 'bad' (*kharab*) woman or a non-believer. Similarly to Sidrat, Amber 'bargains with patriarchy' (Kandiyoti 1991b)—that is, she conforms to patriarchal ideas of women's modesty and purity—to secure the legitimacy of her presence within the public space.

9 There exists a convergence in methodological terms between Sidrat's and Amber's, and the conservative clergy's deployment of the discourse of 'the good Muslim woman.' Both discourses are anchored in a hierarchic framework of male supremacy. However, Sidrat and Amber instrumentalise such discourse differently. Whereas Sidrat activates the image of the 'good' Muslim woman not only to facilitate her activism, but also to express her respect toward the religious Sunni clergy in Lucknow, Amber mobilises such an image to gain legitimacy as a representative of Muslim women among Muslim groups in Lucknow and beyond. Critics of Islamic feminism, such as Qudsia Mirza (2008), lament that such 'bargains with patriarchy' could be detrimental to the reformist endeavour of these women to secure women's social, economic and, political rights.

10 Naish Hasan, founding member of the BMMA shares such concern. She responds with alarm to the growing number of Muslim activists who challenge public space hierarchies by 'uncritically submitting their bodies to the dictates of a bunch of self-appointed religious leaders' (read: the orthodox Sunni and Shia clergy), as she bluntly states.[8] Without denying the importance the female body occupies in Islamic thought and practice, Hasan stresses the flexibility the religious texts offer for the interpretation of what codifies the 'respectable' Muslim woman. Although fighting a similar fight as Sidrat and Amber, Hasan focuses on the mind and not the body as a tool for destabilising ultra-orthodox notions of the public space as exclusively reserved for men. For Hasan, the terrain of struggle is the pious mind rather than the body, and her focus is inward. Therefore, Hasan questions the idea of space arguing; 'respect and dignity can be instilled through the pious mind alone…. There is no need to cover our entire bodies.' Like most Muslims in Lucknow and elsewhere in India, Hasan wears the *salwaar-kurta*: a pair of loose fitting trousers combined with a long, knee-length shirt. She additionally covers her chest with a long shawl (*dupatta*). This typical Indian dress is common as well among Hindus, Parsis, Sikhs, and Christians.[9]

11 So, eager to amalgamate their public activism with their identities as 'good' Muslim women, these activists participate in a complex process of self-representation wherein the feminine Islamic attributes of simplicity and respectability are infused into their public self-representations as autonomous and independent activists. These different interpretations of the 'good' Muslim woman reveal once again Islam as a 'discursive tradition' (Asad 2009 [1986]) or, an area of contestation. Moreover, these specific representations illustrate the fact that the formation of subjectivities, religious identities, and political agency are situational, rather than rigid. However, women's visibility within the public space alone does not (yet) substantially disturb the social order of the public space—or translate in women's rights to access it (Phadke *et al.* 2009). Rather, there needs to be a radical shift away from a conception of the (Islamic) public space as an inherently dangerous space for women toward a feminist consciousness of the public space that establishes women's right to the public space as a 'fundamental claim for a more inclusive citizenship' (Phadke *et al.* 2009: 186).

12 To this end, between 2005 and 2008, Sidrat, Amber, and Hasan have deployed the Hindi, Urdu, and English language press to push back widely-accepted monolithic renderings of Muslim women as a symbol of a religious tradition and as relegated to the private sphere. Using the media as an input channel, these women have—to different extents—upset monolithic ideas of gender and the Islamic public space. In what follows I focus on India's English language press as an analytical lens through which to analyse the manner in which these women initiate a more public debate of women's rights to an equal share of religious public life.[10]

2. Muslim Women's Rights Activists' Public Visibility and the Media

13 Only a decade ago, Muslim women's voices hardly surfaced in India's English language press. Similarly to Western media coverage, India's English language press had heretofore employed a discursive economy in their representation of the issue of Islam and women that constructed Muslim women as stripped of their civil rights: deemed to wear the *burqa*, confined to their homes with no access to education, deprived of political participation and victims of *triple talaq*.[11] Sabina Kidwai (2005: 392) argues that even the positive media coverage of Muslim women's issues typically affords 'no other face for Muslim women than one embodying stereotypes.' Although Indian media's emphasis upon veiling and upon *triple talaq* is still alive and well, there currently exists alongside it reportage that engages 'positively' with issues of Muslim women. Taking into account the request for greater debate on rights of Muslim women's activists and academics, the media started creating room for making visible disagreement amongst different sections of Muslims, as well as amongst Muslim women's activists, in contemporary India. The result is reportage that goes beyond the political controversies and that is far more progressive and rational (Kidwai 2005: 383). Such coverage increasingly features interviews with and stories about Muslim women activists and organisations (Schneider 2009: 62; Kidwai 2005: 391). This coverage offered what is often considered from a modernist-liberal view a 'new' identity for Muslim women: that of a heterogeneous group of individuals who critically analyse and argue for social, political, economic, and legal reform, all from varying perspectives.

14 Sidrat, Hasan, and Amber have taken advantage of this growing tendency in India's English language press to highlight their voices and the activities of their organisation as a vital part of public life. Within a transnational media space, where Islam predominantly appears in conjunction with imagery of war, terrorism, and women's subjugation, Muslim women's activists and Islamic feminists tend to emerge as harbingers of 'women's empowerment,' 'liberation' and 'freedom.' Using liberal language, the English language press portrays Muslim women's activism in terms of its progression toward the liberal goal of absolute equality—or shows the great distance it still has to go. Through the media, Muslim women's activists discuss new trends in religious thought on gender and the public space; women too could participate and perform hitherto men-assigned religious duties as knowledgeable Muslim women and Indian citizens.

Guiding prayers for women in the public women's (zenana) park

15 Shehnaz Sidrat (*Bazme Khawateen)* made national headlines when she invited journalists to report about the prayers that she has been leading for women in Lucknow's only women's park (*zenana* park).[12] Located at the heart of the city of Lucknow but sheltered by high walls, the park was deemed an appropriate space because of its capacity to shield its female occupants from the gaze of men. The idea was to offer women a space outside the home in which to congregate, learn about the *Quran*, sing religious songs, recite poems, drink tea and pray. Men were not allowed to participate in these activities. I will note that the influential clergy in Lucknow affiliated with the AIMPLB, with its conservative interpretations of *purdah*, strongly discourages women from praying in public. Glorifying an image of the Muslim woman as a good mother and housewife, the clergy sees a conflict between women's freedom to pray in public and their responsibilities as good homemakers.[13] Challenging the clergy's discursive economy that locates Muslim women entirely within the domestic sphere, Sidrat flung open the gate of the *zenana* park for journalists eager to report about an unusual woman-led collective prayer in 2004.

16 Every year, at the occasion of *eid* (feast of breaking the fast), Sidrat organises a collective prayer in the park, entitled *Salaate Tasbeeh*. This is a special prayer—one that the devout believe may purge them of all sins. Her personal initiative to read the *Salaate Tasbeeh,* a privilege otherwise reserved for men amongst Sunnis in Lucknow, met the interest of the media. Keen to bring to the fore 'the other face of Islam,' *The Times of India* described this unconventional prayer, attended by several hundred Muslim women, as 'a testimony to the free

spirit of Lucknow women, who have ensured that it survived male scepticism.' Giving voice to Sidrat and some of the participants, *The Times* portrayed the event as an opportunity for Muslim women to 'bond' and to demonstrate 'female emancipation.'[14] This coverage applied a modernist discursive framework within which Muslim women's inroads into an otherwise male-dominated arena were labelled 'modern' and posited as a form of 'empowerment.'

17 In our interview, however, Sidrat frames her intervention within the public space beyond the binaries of women's empowerment versus Islamic patriarchy. As she tells me, Muslim women have offered *namaz* in the *zenana* park for over 75 years. Due to the relative seclusion of the park, the religious clergy had never opposed this. As long as the gate was shut and the women remained invisible, there was no uproar. However, when she became president of *Bazme Khawateen* in 1994, Sidrat decided to disrupt the spatial boundaries that shielded Muslim women's activism from the public eye for so long. Arguing that '*purdah* [here the term *purdah* is used in terms of the spatial segregation of the sexes] is not a hindrance for publicising Muslim women's public prayers,' she started to invite the press to the weekly meetings. She explains that her motivation behind this initiative was less to solely disrupt the well-travelled imagery of the subjugated Muslim woman than to contribute to the creation of a feminist consciousness of the public space and the fact that women too can engage in religious activities outside the domestic sphere. To her mind, common understandings of the public space in Islam with their specific configurations of gendered subjectivities and senses of belonging have to be de-naturalised. The publicising of Sidrat reading *namaz* is, I argue, transformative as it de-centres—at least to a certain extent—the public space as a site for normalising male supremacy.

Construction of a women's mosque

18 As mentioned, Shaista Amber is yet another Muslim women's rights activist who currently strives to establish a feminist consciousness of public religious life. Like Sidrat, Amber has sought to create a public space for Muslim women to lead in worship, but the way she approached the problem is somewhat different. In 2008 Amber built a women's mosque on an empty plot of land near Lucknow. Drawing inspiration from STEPS, a Tamil Nadu-based women's development organisation that set up India's first exclusive women's mosque in 2004,[15] Amber works to create a space for women where they have the opportunity to 'share and discuss their concerns with peers other than the family' and to 'offer *namaz* in the mosque,' as she says. In the city of Lucknow, as in most parts of India, to pray in the mosque is a privilege generally reserved for men.[16] Needless to say, the construction of the construction of the women's mosque created a stir among the religious elite in Lucknow. Scholars affiliated with the *Darul Uloom Deoband* in Lucknow, for instance, argue that such 'revolutionary methods to communicate with *Allah*' compromise women's honour and reputation and create social evil.'[17]

19 For Amber, such rhetoric does not originate from the religious texts. Rather, she argues, the clergy deploys the image of the sexualised female that poses a danger to the order of the public space as a means to 'keep women in the dark about their rights' and to 'curtail women's freedom of movement.'[18] Evoking the iconic Islamic figure Hazrat Bibi Hafsa, one of the wives of prophet Muhammed who acted as an *imam* and led women in offering public *namaz,*[19] Amber profoundly challenges such imagery. 'A women's mosque,' Amber explains,

> allows for women to discuss their concerns outside the family. It is an opportunity for women to mingle and share their views on religion and everyday life. Such a mosque therefore fosters women's self-esteem and community feeling. Through prayers, women can learn a lot about their rights and duties of wives and daughters and husbands and sons. To withhold women from praying in public, therefore, violates women's right to information. Also, in the future I intend to have a female *imam* leading prayers in this mosque.

20 In order to finance the construction of the mosque, Amber sold her heirloom jewellery handed down to her at the time of her wedding. 'A *maulana* (Muslim religious scholar) with a big name,' she proudly asserts, 'laid down the foundation stone of the mosque in 2006.' The mosque is a modest white-painted one-storey building featuring a sunlit prayer hall and a hostel

(*dharamsala*). Its minaret—long and thin in shades of green and white—rises high in the air, dominating the otherwise undeveloped and still affordable area near the Lucknow airport. A Pakistani *maulana* inaugurated the mosque in 2008 in the presence of 'a lot of journalists and reporters,' as Amber tells me proudly.

21 Amber strategically involved the media to address public opinion herself. As a result, the English newspaper *The Telegraph* praised this unusual women's mosque as the 'need of the hour' and as a well-travelled concept that is 'finally knocking on the door of Lucknow, the centre of Islamic learning.'[20] With the support of the media, Amber points to the new political possibilities such a mosque could open up for women in a religiously conservative city such as Lucknow. She envisions it redefining the possibilities for women's participation in public religious life. Accordingly, the media reportage stressed the relevance of such a women's mosque as a marker of progress and as a timely concept representing Muslim women's possibilities in India's democratic political system. India's English language press refers to such intervention within the public space as 'highly relevant' and as a 'promise' for women's future integration into a male-dominated society.

22 However, 'change needs time,' demurs Amber. 'Women and men in Lucknow have to realise that the prohibition for women to pray in public, which has been imposed upon them by the *mullahs*, only serves the interest of the clerics but not the community.' In fact, notwithstanding the positive media coverage, women did not frequent Amber's mosque on a regular basis until two years after it was built. At my visit in 2009 there were only one or two women offering *namaz* in the mosque behind the men-folk. However, at my second visit in 2011, the number of women who joined the men in offering *namaz* had visibly increased. Indeed, instead of just one or two there were now a handful of Muslim women from Lucknow and nearby villages who had come to pray in the mosque. One was an economics student from Lucknow University, who had just recently began coming there; she informed me that she liked to worship Allah while in the company of men and women. She said that offering *namaz* in public gave her a sense of belonging and community. Moreover, she enjoyed discussing matters concerning women and religion with people who, like her, are truly devoted to Islam. It should be noted as well here, that both women learned about the mosque via newspapers and television.[21]

23 The question of whether or not Muslim women should be allowed to pray in public is widely discussed by Muslims from all over the world. In fact, a closer look at online platforms such as islamweb.net, islamqa.info, or islamicislamic.com reveals the transnational debates underway amongst Muslims worldwide. These platforms serve as discussion boards, where believers ask 'knowledgeable' Muslims for advice on various issues ranging from the *Quran*, the *Shariat*, family, politics to health and science. The construction of the mosque is therefore more than just a local phenomenon; it is a part of the 'social life,' to take the phrase of Abu-Lughod (2010: 2), of international struggles and discussions on Muslim women's rights taking place across distance in geographical spatiality and religious orientation. That is to say, Amber's mosque is a visible marker of Muslim women's struggles for social inclusion and integrity as currently debated locally, nationally, and transnationally.

A female qazi and an unconventional wedding

24 The story of Naish Hasan's unorthodox wedding offers yet another example of how Muslim women's rights activists strive for a more inclusive public space. On August 30, 2008, Naish Hasan achieved (trans-)local celebrity status with her unorthodox marriage (*nikah*) to a PhD scholar from Aligarh Muslim University. The wedding was unorthodox for several reasons. First, Hasan altered her mode of dress. Deciding to break with the well-accepted custom amongst Muslims in which the bride completely hides her face behind the veil during the ceremony, Hasan instead donned an embroidered red *saree*. The end of the *saree* (*pallu*) only loosely covered her long hair, leaving her face revealed. Furthermore, Hasan abstained from wearing 'big, big jewellery,' which in her opinion, reduces otherwise contracting agents to mere objects of the religious tradition.[22] Second, at Hasan's wedding the BMMA introduced its version of the 'secular' marriage contract (*nikahnama)* to the public.[23] This contract asks for registration and makes specific stipulations regarding divorce, maintenance and property.

However, the third and most important reason that this wedding received such enormous national and international media coverage was the fact that it was solemnised by a female *qazi*. Dissatisfied with the omnipresence of men at Muslim marriages, Hasan asked Syeda Hameed —a founding member of the Muslim Women's Forum, a member of the Planning Commission and a former member of the National Commission on Women—to solemnise her marriage. Considering such a well-educated and knowledgeable woman as Hameed as well-qualified to take over the function of a *qazi*, Hasan saw no need for a man to perform the rites. After having received approval from reform-oriented *maulanas* in India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, Hameed agreed to perform the *nikah*.

25 Just a few days prior to the marriage, Hasan mentioned her unusual wedding ceremony to a friend of hers—a journalist. The next day, the story was on the front page of a local newspaper. The article created a big stir among Muslims in Lucknow. Muslim women's organisations, including the AIMWPLB, supported the marriage. The clergy, as well as some scholars of the influential Sunni-dominated AIMPLB, conversely labelled the event, which would considerably push the radius of women's activities into the public space, 'useless' and 'unnecessary.'[24] AIMPLB executive committee member Naseema Ali Iqtedar Khan said there is no need for a female *qazi* to perform the wedding if a man is otherwise available.[25] Fauzia Naseema, also a member of the AIMPLB executive committee, was even more critical. She dismissed Hasan's wedding as 'nothing else than a media stunt.'[26] Meanwhile, the orthodox Lucknow Idgah Committee went as far as to deem the marriage 'invalid' and the ceremony a 'cruel joke on Islamic law.'[27] These voices reflect the lines of fragmentation that run through the Muslim community, laying bare the heterogeneity of perspectives on gender in Islam that exist on the ground.

26 Hasan believes this unprecedented wedding to have been the first of its kind in India, if not in the entire Muslim world, and it continued to arouse wide media interest. The national press *The Hindu* described Hasan's wedding as 'unheard of,' while the *Telegraph* likened its effects to 'smashing a centuries-old glass ceiling.' *India Today* dubbed the wedding as 'breaking with tradition' and the *Times of India* wrote that Naish Hasan's wedding ceremony 'breaks many shackles.'[28] Television stations all over India broadcasted footage of Hasan's wedding, which can now be downloaded from YouTube[29] and other websites. The footage neatly shows the crowd of journalists wrangling for a premium spot from which to capture the moment when 'the woman *qazi* creates history in Lucknow.'[30] The English press, without exception, viewed this unorthodox marriage as 'modern,' 'progressive,' 'provocative' and as a true 'challenge' to conservative conceptualisations of women's identity in Islam. Within this media explosion, the protagonist, Naish Hasan, surfaces as independent, modern, self-assertive, and outspoken—qualities which challenge conservative and orthodox interpretations of the feminine ideal that stresses female modesty and subservience. In a personal conversation, Naish Hasan expressed her gratitude toward the media for publicising her unusual wedding. 'It is only through the dissemination of positive imagery of women,' she asserted, 'that the gendered boundaries proscribed by the religious authorities can be effectively probed.'

27 This wedding, like the mosque and the public prayers, shatters hegemonic Islamic ideology that normalises women's inability to perform religious duties, or any other functions in public life. Using the technique of *ijtihad* (interpretive science of juridical reasoning), or, what Qudsia Mirza (2008: 31) terms the 'cultural revival' strategy, these Lucknow-based Muslim women's activists have successfully demonstrated the possibilities that Islamic ideology holds for women within the public space, and they have shrewdly enlisted the media as a tool to ensure that their positions reached as broad an audience as possible. In short, such publicly visible interventions create an important environment for Muslim women to work toward a more inclusive conceptualisation of the public Islamic space. I therefore argue that current efforts by Muslim women's rights activists to resist widely-accepted ideas of Muslim women's restricted access to the public space, using religious discourse and rhetoric to do so, open up new possibilities for political agency.

3. Women's Spaces within the Patriarchal Legal Landscape

28 The comparative analysis of Muslim women activists' multiple strategies to stretch the gendered boundaries of the public space, renders insight into dimensions of power that profoundly shape Muslim women's participation in the domain of politics, law, and religion in contemporary India. The three Muslim women's activists at the centre of this paper challenge the authority of the orthodox clergy with their overt representations of alternative proposals of women's possibilities in Islam—through embodied dimensions of knowledge production. They provocatively challenge hegemonic ideas on gender. Instead of accepting widely-accepted definitions of *purdah*, or Islamic modesty, they re-frame them. Instead of complying with the dictate of Muslim women's invisibility, either by staying at home or hiding their bodies underneath a loose *niqab*, they point to the *quranic* female icons that have earned respect with their contributions to public life. Through intellectual engagement with religious texts, these activists probe the misogynist understanding of public space. Specifically, by enlisting the media to circulate their alternative interpretations of women's rights in Islam, Sidrat, Hasan, and Amber are currently working toward the democratisation of the political and legal space—destabilising the political power wielded by various orthodox factions. In short, using the Indian mass media as an input channel, these Lucknow-based Muslim women's activists work toward carving out spaces of autonomy from which to demonstrate the possibilities that Islamic ideology holds for women within the public (and the private) space.

29 In its abstractions, these activists' approach points toward an understanding of the flexibility of Islamic ideology and practice that is indicative of the unevenness of the categories of justice and gender within ideologically contested legal and political sites (Asad 2009 [1986]). Sidrat, Amber, and Hasan do not feel uncomfortable with their religious beliefs and precepts; rather, it is the power configuration that hinders their participation within the public space that sits uncomfortably with them and hinders their full participation in religious life. So instead of rejecting religion as a framework through which change can be achieved—as Western liberal feminists would do—they self-assertively appropriate religious language and practice to establish a women-friendly consciousness of gender relations in Islam.[31] Muslim women's activists' efforts to consciously reshape women's subjectivity through a religious framework not only destabilises hegemonic ideas on women in Islam, but also contributes to the pluralisation of Islamic thought and practice on a (trans-)national and local level. Muslim women's activists in the city of Lucknow see Islamic cultural practice as 'object of humanistic inquiry,' according to the legal anthropologist Annelise Riles (2005: 1032), rather than a fixed and unchangeable ideology. In order to successfully challenge widely-accepted configurations of gender and power relations, these activists have to convincingly demonstrate that Islamic culture and practice are not static, but can be adjusted so as to secure women's respectability, egalitarianism, freedom, and equality.

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Notes

1 Santos (2002: 360) defines power as social relations of interests and knowledge. What makes social relations an exercise of power, however, is, according to Santos (2002: 356–362), drawing on Foucault, the unequal distribution of knowledge that exists among individuals and/or organisations. According to Foucault (2010: 174–175), power and knowledge directly imply one another as there are no power relations without the correlative field of knowledge. Nor is there any knowledge that does not presuppose as well as constitute power relations.

2 In the context of the Middle East and Northern Africa there exists a large body of scholarship on Islamic feminism. See for example Margot Badran (1995) for Egypt, Anouar Majid (2002) for Morocco and Valentine M. Moghadam (2002), Ziba Mir-Hosseini (1999) or Afsaneh Najmabadi (1993) for Iran.

3 Muslim women's rights activism in India is by no means a new phenomenon, but dates back to colonial times. Back then some elite reform-oriented Muslim women discussed issues of education and *purdah* in elite 'clubs' (Minault 1998; Lateef 1990). However, Muslim women's rights organisations and networks that openly contest misogynistic interpretations of the religious texts as well as Muslim women's political and economic discrimination and marginalisation – issues that are by and large left unaddressed by the state as well as the Muslim leadership – emerged only in the aftermath of Shah Bano in the 1980s (Kirmani 2009: 76).

4 Shaista Amber, Shehnaz Sidrat, and Naish Hasan all see themselves as activists rather than feminists. Although acknowledging the fact that a lot of their activism corresponds with liberal feminists' endeavours to further women's participation in the spheres of politics and law, they strongly feel that a 'radical' feminist label could discredit their community membership.

5 The first case concerned the 28-year-old Imrana, mother of five children, who accused her father-in-law of raping her in June 2005 in a small village in Uttar Pradesh. In this case, the *jati-panchayat* decided that by having had sex with her father-in-law, Imrana had in fact become the mother of her husband. Her husband was henceforth *haram* or illegal. Imrana ignored the decision made by the *jati-panchayat* and continued to live with her husband. As a response, the leading Islamic seminary *Darul Uloom Deoband* issued a *fatwa* (legal opinion) based on the *Hanafi*-school of Islamic jurisprudence, stating that Imrana is no longer rightfully married to her husband. The second case concerns Gudiya, who was carrying the child of her current husband when her presumed-dead first husband returned after five years from the Kargil war. In this particular case, the elders of the village council forbade Gudiya to stay with her husband of three years, whose baby she was expecting at that time. Instead, in the name of Islam, the religious authorities ordered Gudiya to return to her soldier husband to whom she was originally married for only two weeks before he was called to service. The attempts of her second husband to reinstate the marriage were futile, and Gudiya died a year later of blood poisoning, at the age of 26 (Kirmani 2009: 74).

6 I conducted over 70 open and semi–structured interviews with members and representatives of the AIMPLB, the AISPLB, the above-mentioned Muslim women's rights organisations, and the state courts. These interviews were conducted in English, Hindi, or Urdu.

7 Interview with Shaista Amber by the author, Lucknow, 15 December 2009.

8 Interview with Naish Hasan by the author, Lucknow, 26 January 2010.

9 Of course, within an orthodox and conservative institutional environment, Hasan subjects herself to criticism on the part of mainly the ultra-orthodox Muslim clergy. For example, in April 2010 the orthodox seminary *Darul Uloom, Deoband*, India, issued a controversial and highly criticised *fatwa*, which forbade women to work in the public sector and enter politics without wearing the full-body veil (*hijab*). See also Yoginder Sikand's discussion on the Darul Uloom's *fatwa* (http://www.countercurrents.org/sikand140510.htm, accessed 11 November 2012).

10 One reason for my focus on India's English language press is that it is, compared to local Hindi and Urdu newspapers, easily accessible. Nationally and internationally well-respected newspapers such as *The Times of India*, *India Today*, *The Hindu*, or *The Telegraph* are readily available online. Another reason for focusing on India's English language press is the fact that all three activists discussed in this paper were eager to explore the possibilities that national and international reportage offered for their activism beyond their locality. Often, Sidrat, Amber, and Hasan pitched their stories to both the national English and local Urdu and Hindi press so as to maximise their outreach, and strengthen the voices of women's activists in India and abroad. It is, however, important to keep in mind that such exclusive focus on English sources comes with certain limitations. First, it narrows the scope of my analysis to the reportage produced for India's English-speaking elite. Second, such reportage tends to follow Western opinion-making—reproducing modernist liberal perceptions of Islam and women. During my research I also collected and translated Hindi and Urdu newspaper articles which appeared between 2009 and 2011. These reportages, mostly concerned with the various rallies, workshops and seminars that have been organised by Sidrat, Amber or Hasan, were very useful for analysing some of the contests and

dissensions that exist amongst Muslims in Lucknow regarding issues of gender-related religious practices and ideologies.

11 The reporting by the mass media in the West has suffered from the same misinterpretations and misrepresentations of Muslim women, which has substantially contributed to their stereotyping as victims and as mute. For instance, Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) has criticised the ways in which the media and the U.S. government have deployed the popular standard knowledge about Muslim women that portrays them as oppressed, as forced to wear the *burqa* and as relegated to the domestic sphere in their rhetoric on the war in Afghanistan (2002: 785). Similarly, Katherine Bullock (2002: 122–133), who analysed the representations of Iraqi women in articles that were published in the *New York Times* since the official beginning of the war, argues that in the context of such press releases Islam and Muslim women have been subject to strong normative and stereotyping discourses. She asserts that the trope of the covered female body emerged as a yardstick according to which progress is measured. Along such lines, Islam is depicted as incompatible with Western notions of secularism and liberalism (2002: 89). Such representations of Muslim women were also criticised for being Orientalist (Said 2003 [1978]). For instance, postcolonial scholars such as Homi Bhabha (1984), Talal Asad (2009 [1986]) and Chandra Talpade Mohanti (1988) decried Western Orientalist representations of the non-West as a strategy which normalises the dominance of 'the West' over 'the East.'

12 The women's, or *zenana,* park is a piece of land in the heart of Old Lucknow that was allotted by the city to the then newly-formed *Bazme Khawateen* in 1934.

13 AIMPLB member Ateeq Qasmi, interview by author, Lucknow, 3 March 2011.

14 http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2004-10-31/lucknow/27159961_1_muslim-women-offer-prayers-bazme-khawateen (accessed 15 April 2012).

15 For more information on the women's mosque see: http://sports.rediff.com/news/2004/aug/11muslim.htm (accessed 26 September 2012) and http://www.outlookindia.com/printarticle.aspx?224749 (accessed 26 September 2012).

16 http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report_clerics-rattled-over-namaz-by-women_1163193 (accessed 15 April 2012); http://www.hindu.com/2008/05/07/stories/2008050753660500.htm (accessed April 15, 2012); http://www.indianexpress.com/news/begum-has-many-aces-under-her-veil/449378/ (accessed April 15, 2012); http://www.siliconindia.com/shownews/Women_offer_prayers_at_mosque_defy_seminarys_edict-nid-41858-cid-3.html (accessed 15 April 2012); http://wunrn.com/news/2008/05_08/05_19_08/051908_india.htm (accessed April 15, 2012).

17 As Mahmood (2005: 65) argues in the context of the women's piety movement in Egypt, the reasons behind restrictions on women guiding collective prayers are twofold. First, there is the general belief that since the *Quran* makes men the guardian of women, the latter should not serve in significant positions of leadership over men. Second, there is the prevailing notion that a woman's voice can nullify the act of worship since her voice is capable of provoking sexual feelings in men. The orthodox clergy's opposition to Amber's, Sidrat's and Hasan's notable interventions within the public space was most explicitly expressed through political debates. However, all three activists state that they have experienced actual threats by individual Muslim representatives over the phone. These verbal harassments ranged from simple defamations to actual threats of bodily harm and even death.

18 Interview by the author with Shaista Amber, Lucknow, 15 December 2009.

19 See: http://www.hindu.com/2008/05/07/stories/2008050753660500.htm (accessed 26 September 2012).

20 http://www.telegraphindia.com/1080507/jsp/nation/story_9236894.jsp (accessed 15 April 2012); http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report_clerics-rattled-over-namaz-by-women_1163193 (accessed 15 April 2012);http://www.hindu.com/2008/05/07/stories/2008050753660500.htm (accessed 26 September 2012); http://twocircles.net/2008sep02/women_pray_along_men_lucknow_mosque.html (accessed 15 April 2012).

21 Interviews by the author, Lucknow, 10 March 2011.

22 The phrase 'big big jewellery' used by Hasan indicates the heavy and opulent bridal jewellery worn by Muslim women in India. This includes finger rings, bangles, a big nose ring, a heavy choker necklace, earrings, a *tikka* (forehead jewellery) and a waist belt. For Hasan, this kind of bridal jewellery signifies women as mere objects within marriage rather than active agents. Naish Hasan, interview by author, Lucknow, 22 January 2010.

23 *The New York Times* termed the BMMA marriage contract as a means 'to seek gender equality in marriage.' See: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/25/world/asia/25iht-letter25.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (accessed 19 September 2014).

24 The AIMPLB did not entirely oppose Hasan's marriage being solemnised. Many clerics believe that a marriage can be solemnised without the presence of a *qazi*. As according to the Islamic scripts, the approval of the bride and groom to the marriage and the public announcement of the wedding to

the wedding guests is enough for the marriage to be considered valid. Naseema Ali Ikhtedar Khan in Lucknow, interview by author, 13 February 2011.

25 Naseema Ali Ikhtedar Khan, interview by author, Lucknow, 13 February 2011.

26 Fauzia Naseem, interview by author, Lucknow, 9 February, 2010; Rukhsana Lari, interview by author, Lucknow, 9 February 2010.

27 See: http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/26263977/ns/today-weddings/t/women-led-muslim-wedding-sparks-debate-india/#.T47tLIuRBvw (accessed 18 April 2012).

28 http://www.telegraphindia.com/1080813/jsp/frontpage/story_9686772.jsp (accessed 18 April 2012); http://www.hindu.com/2008/08/13/stories/2008081360251400.htm (accessed 17 April 2012); http://www.rediff.com/news/2008/aug/12up.htm (accessed 18 April 2012); http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2008-08-13/lucknow/27920567_1_triple-talaq-nikah-woman (accessed 18 April 2012); http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/Married+to+controversy/1/13563.html (accessed 18 April 2012).

29 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g35Lhqmsc7k (accessed 17 April 2012).

30 http://www.hindu.com/2008/08/13/stories/2008081360251400.htm (accessed 17 April 2012).

31 Here it is worth noting that groups like the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, a progressive association of American nuns in the U.S., or groups seeking to ordain women to the priesthood in Christian denominations and Mormonism, such as the Mormon women's organisation Ordain Women (http://ordainwomen.org/ accessed 16 December 16 2014), also work within the framework of piety. Similar to the Muslim women's activists discussed in this article, these women use the strategy of appearing devout and committed to the faith, a discursive strategy designed to protect the movement from (the plentiful) accusations of apostasy.

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Abstract

Within the last decade, Muslim women's rights activists in postcolonial India have acquired increasing visibility within the contested public space. This paper looks pointedly at the manner in which three ideologically different Muslim women's rights activists work toward carving out women's spaces within the men-dominated political and legal landscape in the city of Lucknow. In doing so, it examines first: how Muslim women's activists carefully orchestrate their appearance within the public space, and second: their strategic utilisation of the media for the dissemination of their alternative proposals concerning the 'true Islam' and the 'ideal Muslim woman.' This paper argues that Muslim women's rights activists' interventions within the public space destabilise hegemonic patterns of knowledge and

authority. Laying bare the possibilities Islamic discourse and its embodiment offer for women's agency, this paper challenges liberal and modernist perspectives that view religion as being obstructive to women's freedom and autonomy.

Index terms

Keywords : Muslim women's rights activism, Islamic justice, political activism, public space, media, women's agency